

GUEST ESSAY

Does Co-Housing Provide a Path to Happiness for Modern Parents?

Oct. 22, 2021



By Judith Shulevitz

Ms. Shulevitz is a cultural critic who has written extensively about family, feminism and related topics.

Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Eastern Village, a 55-unit apartment complex off a commercial strip in Silver Spring, Md., is a surprisingly lovely place, considering that it once housed the drab offices of a social workers' association and then stood abandoned for nearly a decade, water dripping through the ceilings. When I visited this summer, ivy cascaded so exuberantly over the facade that I walked past the entrance. The landscaped courtyard, wrested out of a parking lot, exuded European charm. Looking up, I saw open walkways lined with balconies, flowers and herbs. Then I spotted a baldish man sitting at a little round table waving to me. He had to be Rabbi Jason Kimelman-Block, a friend of a friend I had asked to show me around the place.

I was there to find out about life in a co-housing community. Ever since I had my first child and was sucked into the vortex of parental logistics, I'd been wondering how to make child rearing a more sociable activity. I hadn't foreseen that motherhood would turn our home in the suburbs, a Dutch colonial with a box-hedged yard, into a site of solitary confinement — a very bucolic site, I freely admit. (Having no right to complain has never stopped me from complaining.) But when the baby and I trundled along narrow sidewalks or weed-choked roadsides, we saw almost no people, just cars. "It was as if mankind had already made way for another species," I told my husband, stealing the line from the novelist W.G. Sebald.

Around then, I began to read desultorily about American experiments in communal living — 19th-century utopias, religious communities, hippie communes. These seemed as far-off as the moon. Still, I hoped that they'd pull back the curtain of the present and reveal a different tableau of motherhood.

Several years later, it has become clear that I am not alone in my longing for the shared life. About four years ago, stories began appearing about co-living, often an investor-driven effort to create dormitory-like housing, mostly for transient, affluent twentysomethings. (Think WeWork for the off hours.) Co-living apartments are now offered to families, too, along with cleaning services, child care, community events and yoga — all for a nice, fat price.

The most recent manifestation of the communalist impulse is the postvaccine nostalgia for the pandemic pod. People are now telling reporters that they miss the camaraderie of those pared-down social networks, as well as the frequent physical company of the same group of friends, the "transformative power of proximity," as the psychologist Susan Pinker calls it.

I was late to find out about co-housing, a species of intentional community that dates back 30 years, in the United States, anyway. (It emerged in Denmark in the 1970s.) Forced to characterize co-housing in a phrase, you might say "living together, separately." Those living together have built a community based on, well, belief in community. But they live separately, in that they own their homes, condo-style.

Co-housing sounds confusingly similar to co-living but has a whole different vibe. Co-housers aren't transient. They have a much stickier idea of social affiliation, and they're not about to rent a bedroom in some random complex. To draw even finer distinctions: Co-housing communities are not communes. Residents do not give up financial privacy any more than they give up domestic privacy. They have their own bank accounts and commute to ordinary jobs. If you were lucky enough to grow up on a friendly cul-de-sac, you're in range of the idea, except that you don't have to worry about your child being hit by a car as she plays in the street. A core principle of co-housing is that cars should be parked on a community's periphery.

This, I thought, was an idea with promise. Co-living accommodates precarity; co-housing seeks stability. Podding is a byproduct of the collapse of society; co-housing builds society.

Out of the 165 co-housing communities around the country, Eastern Village interested me because it's urban and vertical, while the majority are suburban or at least suburbanish. I wondered whether co-housing could survive the claustrophobia of city living and the resulting need for personal space. My cheeks still get hot with embarrassment when I remember a remark in an elevator: It was a few

years after my son was born, and I'd moved back to Manhattan, hoping to find the something I missed in the suburbs. "You're not from around here, are you?" a man said, after I tried to start a conversation. Oh, right, I thought. People crammed into a box don't want to talk to a chirpy lady they might have to edge away from. I never did get to know the other families in the building.

There are other, better-known urban co-housing communities around the country, but Eastern Village has the virtue of not being exemplary. For one thing, it was built from the top down rather than the bottom up. Model co-housing tends to be grass-roots: First the group meets to explore its wants and needs, then it finds an architect who designs a community just right for them, and finally it builds. From the time a group of would-be co-housers forms to the time it moves in, two to five years can pass. The idea for Eastern Village, on the other hand, came from a developer. He undertook the daunting task of retrofitting the building, then asked someone better versed in co-housing to go out, put together a group and teach participants how to live together.

The process still took two and a half years, but it struck me as a more replicable model. If co-housing didn't have to be handcrafted, I thought, maybe it could be scaled up. And this seems the moment to think about how.

Americans may be about to experience three once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to reconsider how they house themselves. The first is the two big spending bills working their way through Congress. If they pass, they could provide billions of dollars to alleviate homelessness and increase affordable housing. The second opportunity proceeds from the shift to working from home: Record numbers of office buildings stand empty and ready for the refurbishing, and they won't all be refilled.

The third force that could push us to change our way of life is a heightened awareness of isolation. In a 2020 survey by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, one-third of Americans described themselves as seriously lonely — up from one-fifth before the Covid pandemic. Loneliness is now understood as a public health crisis, ranking as high among risk factors for mortality as heavy smoking, drinking and obesity.

Contrary to what one might think, the loneliest people in America aren't the elderly. They're young adults (close to two-thirds of them, according to the Harvard survey) and mothers of small children (about half). This makes sense: Young people tend to lead migratory lives, leading to weak social ties. Mothers have their children, although almost a quarter of them are raising those children without a partner; the United States has the highest rate in the world of children living with only one parent. With or without a partner, a mother may still have a hard time finding a fulfilling social life, since paid work and unpaid maternal labor take up so much of her time.

The pandemic lockdown exposed women's solitude, in particular, as a function not just of time but also of space. Afraid to go out into the public domain, all caregivers — the newly full-time ones as well as those who had already put care at the center of their lives — became painfully aware that the private domain can be a very lonely and demanding place.

Under the circumstances, co-housing has the potential, if nothing else, to furnish ideas of how to build for community. After all, you'd never get away with snubbing people in the elevator at Eastern Village.



Rose Wong

If there is an adage that informs life in co-housing, it's treat thy neighbor as thy family. Thy extended family, that is, assuming it's a happy one. And what do happy families do? For one thing, they share stuff. As Rabbi Kimelman-Block led me through what felt like a labyrinth, he opened several overstuffed "sharing closets." One was full of expensive, space-hogging items like travel cribs and skis. Another was for things being given away.

What else do families do? Well, chores, preferably cheerfully and collaboratively. And indeed, co-housers are expected to sign up for maintenance and cleanup days. Families also look out for one another. In co-housing that means, among other things, helping keep an eye on all the children. Many communities pay for formal day care. Most important, co-housers eat together. Breaking bread is probably the most effective bonding ritual society has ever come up with, and co-housers take turns cooking for and serving meals to other members. Some communities offer meals as often as six times a week. (Attendance is never mandatory.)

Most co-housing communities are anchored by a large, shared kitchen. It forms the heart of the common house, which may also offer pools, carpentry workshops, dance studios or meeting rooms — you name it, some community has it. In Eastern Village, common spaces have been cleverly tucked around the complex. Wending our way from basement to roof, Rabbi Kimelman-Block and I went through a dining room, a room for table tennis and foosball, a living room with a fireplace and fat leather chairs, a children's playroom, a lamp-lit quiet room,

a game room, a laundry room, an exercise room, a small lending library. The kitchen, though, is a problem. It's not set up to cook communitywide dinners, in part because the fire marshal insisted that it install a crushingly expensive commercial range, and it went instead with a "warm-up kitchen," as architect and developer Don Tucker calls it. So Eastern Village is more or less stuck with potluck.

But then again, as my mother liked to say, the perfect is the enemy of the good. We have to make do if we want to make change.

Today, the detached single-family house — the lonesome cowboy model of domestic architecture — dominates the American landscape so thoroughly that it feels as if it were inevitable. As of 2019, there were about 100 million single-family homes in the United States (including mobile and prefab homes), compared to about 40 million multifamily ones. But it didn't have to turn out this way. Although the home on the farm had been the American ideal since Thomas Jefferson popularized pastoralism, as the country urbanized after the Civil War, many visionaries saw opportunities for a less atomized, more female-friendly lifestyle.

The landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted, for one, imagined Emerald City-like metropolises with public laundries, bakeries and kitchens, taking some of the burden off housewives. Amenities like sewers, gutters and sidewalks would make streets more appealing for women. Women's rights activists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and a now-forgotten feminist named Melusina Fay Peirce envisioned Eastern Village-like cooperatives in apartment complexes, complete with communal laundries, sewing rooms, kitchens and dining rooms. Peirce called it "cooperative housekeeping" and thought women should make money at it.

During the early part of the 20th century, however, those reveries retreated into science fiction novels. Many forces converged to rob them of reality, not least the Red Scare, when politicians developed an allergy to anything that seemed to have a flavor of socialism or feminism. Along with builders, they began to promote the single-family dream house, with its Harry Homeowner and his happy housewife.

Today, roughly three-quarters of the residential land in metro areas is set aside for such houses and yards. Hub-and-spoke roads and commuter railways have grown up around them. Elaborate exclusionary zoning codes were written to protect them from the taint of commerce and industry — as well as to keep white, wealthy neighborhoods away from Black and poorer ones. The distance between home and everything else imposed by these laws is the reason most Americans need to drive to shop or work.

Back when the majority of breadwinners were male and made the journey downtown unburdened by domestic concerns, a long commute wasn't a big logistical challenge. Today, mothers are also making those commutes, but they still have domestic burdens. Working from home improves the situation only if child care is available.

Co-housing arose, in part, as a solution to the work-life problem. In 1969, Hildur Jackson — just one among many co-housing pioneers, but an eloquent one — was living in a house in Copenhagen, a law school graduate unsure whether she should stay home with her two little boys or embark on a law career. "There was no apparent third option," she wrote in a remembrance. Then she read an article titled "Children Need 100 Parents."

Ms. Jackson decided to start a six-family community on an old farm in a Copenhagen suburb. The families built homes around two giant lawns, which were used largely for games, particularly soccer. The barn was turned into a common house, and three Icelandic horses were bought for the stables. "We chose to have no borders between our gardens," she wrote. "We raised chickens, tended a large common vegetable garden and had fruit trees and berry bushes." Days were set aside for community maintenance. When her husband traveled on business, which he did often, "I never felt isolated," she wrote. When she had her third child, she had 11 other parents to help.

Co-housing (called "living communities" in Denmark) soon spread throughout Scandinavia and to the Netherlands and Germany; communities are now found all over Europe, as well as in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In the 1980s, the architects Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, who were married and business partners at the time, began importing co-housing to the United States. (Between the two of them, they have built or been consultants on many of the co-housing communities in the country.) The two got involved in the movement because they wanted children but their lives seemed too hectic: "We would come home from work exhausted and hungry, only to find the refrigerator empty," Mr. Durrett has written. So they went to Denmark to study another way to build for parenting.

Co-housing is the nonthreatening heir of America's far more radical communitarian past. And during my many years of self-education, I discovered that communitarianism has often had a feminist face.

Early socialists avowed an egalitarianism so radical that it included housewives. Nineteenth-century progressives, male as well as female, understood wives' solitary and unremunerated duties as central to their oppression. Socialists set up model villages and touted them as a way to inspire workers to abandon cities, factories and industrial bosses. But they also promised to enfranchise women and free them from the shackles of domestic drudgery.

Robert Owen, the most famous British socialist of his day, and his French counterpart, Charles Fourier, envisioned the collectivization of women's work in communal kitchens, dining rooms and nurseries, although they seemed to think this would require the construction of vast, ornate (and unrealistic) palaces. Owen's and Fourier's followers, known as Cooperators, established close to 50 socialist communities in rural areas in the Northeastern and Midwestern United States in the 1820s to 1840s. The leaders, who were almost always men, rarely put theory into practice when it came to women. As Carol A. Kolmerten, a historian and the author of "Women in Utopia," a study of

American Owenite communities, wrote, it fell to female Cooperators to prepare the food, wash the clothes and teach the little ones. Or, if the women toiled in fields and workshops, they would still cook and clean in the evenings. Wives who had arrived full of hope left, taking their husbands with them.

Male obtuseness was not the main reason these settlements failed. Other realities proved more damaging. Some settlements couldn't generate enough cash to pay off the loans that paid for the land. Life in the wilderness wasn't palatial; it involved log cabins and mosquitoes. Refugees from cities didn't know how to farm. Class differences among members reasserted themselves, leading to factionalism. But the alienation of one-half of the population (the "woman problem," Owen came to call it) didn't help.

On the other hand, secular socialists accounted for only a small fraction of America's intentional communities. Millenarian Christians — Shakers, Mormons, the Oneida Community and Anabaptist offshoots like the Amish and the Hutterites — built many more, and theirs tended to last longer, as Lawrence Foster writes in "Women, Family and Utopia." Perhaps that's because when their leaders broke down the walls of nuclear families to create communal ones, they did so to strengthen their members' attachment to God and commitment to building his kingdom on earth.

What is remarkable about some of these religious communes is the degree to which they defied the gender norms of their day, in some cases going further than the socialists. The Shakers weren't feminist in a way contemporary Americans would recognize. They didn't question the gendered division of labor: Women worked in the kitchens and did the weaving, while men did the farm labor. But women's work wasn't seen as inferior to men's. Both helped sustain the community; therefore both were equal in God's eyes. More important, Shaker leaders were as likely to be female as male.

In the Oneida Community, a sect that eschewed what its leader called the gloominess of "the little man-and-wife circle" and replaced it with nonmonogamy, women were able to participate without restriction in every aspect of life — religious, economic and social.

Collectivizing domestic labor gave groups incentives to come up with labor-saving household devices. The Shakers patented a water-powered washing machine that cleaned clothes by churning them, an improvement on previous devices. Oneidans may or may not have invented the lazy susan (the point is debated); in any case, they used it to reduce the labor required to serve food in a communal dining hall. With the same goal in mind, they came up with, among other things, an industrial potato peeler and a mop wringer.

These old-time religious communes hold lessons for us moderns. "From a feminist viewpoint the major achievement of most communitarian experiments was ending the isolation of the housewife," wrote Dolores Hayden in her classic study of feminist communalism, "The Grand Domestic Revolution." "A second achievement was the division and specialization of household labor."

After the tour, Rabbi Kimelman-Block roped in whoever was around to talk to me. We gathered on Eastern Village's xeriscaped roof, its communal green space. Most people brought drinks. I ate Ethiopian takeout. Professions ranged from Realtor to social-justice activist. Eastern Village has 110 residents, 30 of them college age or younger. The ones I met were mostly middle-aged, though one couple bought in when they were in their 70s.

Parenting was the leading answer to my question about why they'd chosen co-housing: Kids aren't stuck in their apartments; they can run downstairs. Neighbors' kids or older members were almost always around to babysit, and for a while, there was a somewhat more formal day care arrangement. Adults benefit from the ad hoc interaction, too. Instead of planning dinner or drinks weeks in advance, on any Wednesday or Saturday, a sociable soul can find a neighbor to share a snack or a beer with.

One unexpected comment came from Adrienne Torrey, a curly-haired middle-aged woman with a relaxed manner. "Co-housing attracts a lot of introverts," she said. That hadn't occurred to me, but inclined to introversion myself, I immediately saw the logic. Who needs a community more than those who have a hard time spontaneously cobbling one together? Or — my next thought — than new parents stranded by their change of circumstance? By contrast, as soon as you show up in co-housing, you are swept into a round robin of meals and festivities and cleanup days.

The most controversial topic that evening was meetings. Almost all co-housing communities make big decisions by consensus. One member complained that arriving at unanimity is cumbersome and unnecessary. The rest disagreed. However long consensus takes, everyone feels heard and learns the art of compromise. That, I'm told, may be the most important key to successful group living.

If co-housing offers solutions for so many of the problems from which America's mothers suffer, if we are now uniquely positioned to put at least some of its lessons into effect — thanks to the pandemic's unintentional consciousness-raising and the possibility that Congress will pass the Biden administration's plans to rebuild the economy — what's stopping us?

During one of my several conversations with Charles Durrett, I asked what he would identify as the biggest obstacle to building co-housing in the United States. "Our culture," he said promptly. "We tend to think of ourselves as independent pioneers. We're not a cooperative kind of culture." But he grew up in a tight-knit neighborhood, he said, and his neighbors "played a huge role in my well-being."

But planning departments, regional as well as municipal, don't help. Typical American zoning laws frown on multifamily complexes unless they've been exiled to poorer parts of town. Even accessory dwelling units, such as mother-in-law apartments, are unpopular, lest they be rented to "undesirables." Those are the most notorious restrictions; they're not the only ones Mr. Durrett has had to fight as he tried to

build co-housing.

City planning laws simply don't envision communities focused on residents' helping one other and keeping children safe. One city demanded two-car driveways for each unit, a waste of space and money in a community that keeps cars far from houses. When a town insisted that to accommodate the number of people in a proposed community, it would have to pay for a \$1 million fire truck, Mr. Durrett asked the officials what the fire department's most common call was. "Pick up and put back," they told him, meaning putting seniors who have fallen out of their beds back into them. "We can do that for ourselves," he said. Finding people who can put other people back in bed is precisely what co-housing is good at.

The other challenge, of course, is that not all people want to share their lives. People have to be willing to sacrifice time (all those meetings, the grounds maintenance) and the luxury of self-absorption (the small talk expected from those on their way to the mailroom). Co-housing may consume emotional energy that would otherwise go to keeping other social circles — work colleagues, college buddies, fellow parents at our children's schools — spinning in the air. "Living in co-housing is not easy," said Ann Zabaldo, the person hired by Eastern Village's developer to recruit and educate its future occupants about the art of co-housing. But, she added, "it is so much richer, like drinking deeply from the well."

Communal living by itself will never solve any one major social problem, be it loneliness or sexism or anything else. Although much more communal architecture can (and should) be built, you can't mass-produce community. People have to be able to see the benefits before they'll make the necessary commitments.

But life is changing in ways that may make collaborative coexistence more attractive. Rents are on the rise. People are getting used to the sharing economy. And then there's that bottom-line truth exposed by the pandemic: Take away child care, and women stop working for pay and don't start again, like the nearly two million of them who have dropped out of the labor force since February 2020. Something must be done.

In the past few years, states and cities around the country have started reconsidering single-family zoning or dared to vote to put an end to it. Last month, Gov. Gavin Newsom of California signed into law bills to limit single-family zoning and permit construction of buildings with up to 10 units near public transit.

A wholesale revision of zoning codes could lead to a new built environment, one that would nudge us toward a new mind-set. We should build co-housing on a large scale. But even if we don't, we could start reshaping the contours of our hyperindividualist and antimaternalist landscapes so as to encourage solidarity and fellow feeling rather than aloofness: Co-housing communities are centered on their greenswards; we need more parks. Co-housing puts people before cars; towns and cities should do the same. Co-housers live together, meaning they are around in case of need; the least inspiration we can take from that is to make our housing stock more varied, less focused on the nuclear family, so that members of extended families and groups of friends can be there for one another, too.

If this sounds not unlike the best-designed urban neighborhoods in America, well, maybe it's not. But the pandemic has sparked a flight from cities and a demand for more suburban housing, and the boom in the market right now is in exurbia — low-density, lower-cost suburbs on the outer edges of metropolitan areas. As these neighborhoods are built, in all likelihood old design habits will prevail. But there's no harm in imagining, and fighting for, a land-use philosophy focused on making life more pleasant for parents and children — and for the introvert in all of us.

In the 19 years since I had my first child, I have spent a lot of time thinking about how my life might have been different if I'd known about Hildur Jackson's "third option." What if there had been tens of thousands of co-housing communities in America instead of a couple hundred? Maybe I would have moved into one rather than back to unfriendly Manhattan.

If I had to single out one feature of cooperative living I find particularly attractive, it would be regular, spontaneous contact with people of all ages. I had my children later in life, and my parents weren't healthy enough to spend as much time with their grandchildren as all of us wanted, and then, as happens, they died. I'm nostalgic for an intergenerational experience I never had.

A few weeks ago, I watched my teenage daughter spend an entire meal talking conspiratorially to two of my best friends. How often do American teenagers open up to their parents' friends? What would it have been like for her to be able to do that throughout her childhood with surrogate aunts and uncles and grandparents? The three of them sat just out of earshot, making it hard for me to eavesdrop, which I'm sure was the point. But the sight of them gossiping made me think that maybe, despite the blank suburban streets and the chilly city elevators and my never quite figuring out where we should live, I'd done something right.

Judith Shulevitz (@JudithShulevitz) is a cultural critic and the author of "The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time." She still lives in New York City.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow *The New York Times Opinion* section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.